

## **What Should Your Reading Response Look Like?**

### **Introduction –**

Title: Out Walked Mel  
Author: Paula Boock  
Date Finished: 14<sup>th</sup> October 2011

### **Synopsis –**

Out walked Mel is the story of a 17 year old girl who embarks on two journeys - one across New Zealand, and the other, an unexpected discovery of self. The journey begins in her home town of Dunedin, where she and her best friend Wai have a falling out, and Mel might get expelled. Rather than face her family, the school or her best friend Mel decides to start her school holidays early and hitch hikes to see her father in Christchurch. This decision leads to encounters with some “interesting” characters and first time experiences that include - playing chicken with a car, sleeping in a barn and receiving the Heimlich Manoeuvre.

Though she reaches Christchurch and the safe hold of her father’s home, she is only there for a brief time before he hands her a bankcard with a thousand dollars in it and encourages her to fly to Auckland to have some time out and see her boy friend Benny. While in with her father she finds out some things about her mother who died when she was 7 years old, in a car crash.

Benny greets her at the airport in Auckland and they are no sooner in the doors of his flat, when he is pressuring her to sleep with him. Taken back by his hastiness, Mel pushes him away and they fight about the misunderstanding before Benny apologises and they both move onto getting ready for a gig he has later that night at a club called The Fridge. She meets his two other flatmates, Rochelle and Abbey as well.

At the club, Mel agrees to play the drums to a song her and Benny wrote together. She is invigorated by this first time experience. After being congratulated by everyone, she then hears Benny and Rochelle sing a duet that arouses thoughts of unfaithfulness. She tries to leave the club but blacks out after everything goes white and fuzzy. This unexplained experience comes full circle later in the story. That evening Mel had decided she was ready to sleep with Benny, who froze when she sat naked on his bed. Embarrassed by the feeling of rejection, Mel angrily cusses at Benny and they fight again before he leaves the room.

The next morning, she sneaks away before anyone wakes and catches a plane to Kaitia then a bus to Cape Reinga. She meets an older American lady who sits by her on the bus and they instantly hit it off. This woman gives Mel some food for thought, about her life and choices ahead. Once at the Cape, Mel experiences something mystical and receives some terrible news as well. Her world stops. This unexpected twist is what brings an end to Mel’s running and her return to Dunedin, and eventually, school.

### **What I liked about the story –**

I enjoyed this because it was a relaxed, familiar read partially because of the colloquial language and also because of the first person narrative. We are brought instantly into Mel’s world by her sharing with us her dreams to travel with Wai, who by the end of the book she admits was her, “very best friend, the person I loved most in the world outside of my family.”

Because the language was so relaxed and natural, it helped the reader feel at home. One was able to relate easily to the thoughts, feelings and events that were happening in this teenager's life. Her choices were understandable, and her reactions predictable because they are similar to how you'd react in that situation. This can best be seen when she is on the bed naked, offering herself to Benny. She uses a simile to describe her feeling like "a bird stranded on the ground near a cat – any tiny movement may mean death." Wanting to disappear, cheeks pounding red, wishing she could faint. This momentary pause draws us into that naked moment with Mel, wandering "does he want me or not?" actually causing you to feel her shame also. Angered with feelings of rejection, she swears "You bloody shitty bastard, I hate you!" A justified reaction in our view, given it wasn't just Mel he shamed. Language such as this that rolls off the tongue so easily in every day conversation with natural response is one reason why this book is a good read.

First person narrative reinforces the natural feel of this story as well. From the first page we are steered toward Mel and her adolescent struggles with relationships predominantly. The entire story can be brought back to how Mel deals with significant relationships in her life. Mel's relationship with the school, best friend, father, mother, brother and boy friend - interestingly, a common theme running through all of these, are Mel's tendency to run. The first paragraph tips you off as to what you can expect in the story, saying "it began with Wai and ended with Wai. And in between, I was so busy running that I don't recall seeing her at all – except the once". When you think about the progression of the story, it begins with a fall out her and Wai have, she spends the next few days running, from school, expulsion and Wai, then again from Benny after she feels rejected. And of course it ends with her return to Dunedin again for Wai. Sadness surrounded her reasons for leaving and also her reasons for returning, yet in this journey of escape that took her across New Zealand, she found personal direction for her self. This can be seen firstly when she is drumming on stage, she describes it as feeling "consummated" and then again at the end when she agrees to return to school.

### **How I connect with the story –**

The part I related most with throughout the whole story was the relationship she had with her best friend Wai because it's as binding as the relationship I have built with my best friend over the years. Her description is exactly how I feel, she says, "I don't really have many other friends you see, not ones that I don't have to pretend to". I tend to avoid socialising unnecessarily purely for this reason, I find it exhausting. The older I get, the worse this antisocial behaviour is becoming. When I think about why, it all boils back to the fact that I feel like I have to put on pretence. A façade that with love ones - especially my best friend who is more like my sister than my real sister's – is non existent. Mel asked the question – "how was it that Wai always understood?" Again, this made me reflect in gratitude on the relationship of trust I have with my best friend, safe in the knowledge that they accept your weaknesses and love you in spite of them. They help you become a better person through their patience and awahi. Though Wai only features briefly at the beginning of the story, we know from Mel's thoughts and memories shared, that her influence has been great when she has a fall out with Benny and says, "Wai knew me better than Benny did, better than anyone...If only I could talk to her; she'd know what to do." If ever I need advice about anything, my best friend is the first one I call.

### **How the story connects with the world –**

Working with youth both at school and at church, I recognise that choosing the “right” time for your “first” time can be quite stressful, especially if there’s any peer pressure or one sidedness to the decision. Mel struggles with this while staying at Benny’s place because he wrongly thought since she had now turned 17, being “practically” an adult, she had come to visit him for that purpose. They were barely in the door and he was pressuring her to sleep with him. Not all girls would have had the courage to say what she did, ‘Look Benny, read my lips. I don’t want to have sex with you. End of story.’ Luckily, Benny is not a creep and did not force himself on her. Instead, reeling in regret and confusion, he apologised and said he was still glad she had come.

What this incident did do however, is plant the seed of doubt in Mel’s mind. She started thinking things like, “Benny was right. Most seventeen year olds I know had had sex, or reckoned they had. Was I being unfair to Benny? He was nineteen, after all, and we’d been together for almost a year. How long was I going to keep refusing?” I was raised in a Christian church that instils in youth the belief that we should remain a virgin until we were married. This goal is increasingly difficult nowadays for young people to abide by, and consequently I know of mothers as young as 14 who allow their grand parents to raise the child, because they are still children themselves in other ways. This step into adulthood is an individual choice and should be made carefully. I respected Mel for her decision and strength to wait until the time “felt” right and not rushed.

### **Conclusion –**

Overall, I enjoyed the book because it was easy to read with use of colloquial language. Also, the main character and her experiences were easy to relate to because of the first person narrative allowing us to easily get inside her thoughts and reproduce her feelings. I’d recommend this book to anyone who thinks relationships and choices are important in life.